

COVER STORY TUSCANY

The Eatalian Job

SOITY BANERJEE PENS A BRAZEN LOVE LETTER TO THE DELICIOUS, HEAVING TABLES OF TUSCANY

Twilight at the Piazza del Repubblica in Cortona; and (right) bruschetta with ricotta and figs

PHOTOGRAPHS: CORBIS

Da Vinci was a potential PETA activist. Michelangelo didn't care a fig (leaf) for food and wine (or David's nakedness). And Dante cast gluttons into a three-headed monster's maw. Which is why they went on to do great things. Important things. And in Tuscany! Had they spent half as much time as I did with my nose in a wine glass and my fork in a cow or wild boar or rabbit or guinea fowl, the world would have been starved of great greatness. I aspire to none such, and throw caution to the hell-fires as I eat and drink my way through twenty-two meals, five wine tastings and one olive oil tasting in seven days and seven nights. A touch over-much? Certainly not. This is Tuscany!

Everyone's here to eat—even the culture vultures, who uncork their holidays at the Uffizi's door. Making it that much more difficult to choose between the famous *trattorie* and *ristorantes* and the equally-famous *trattorie* and *ristorantes* in open piazzas, tangled alleys and villas out of town.

At first, it seems easy enough. Waking up in a seventeenth-century estate with frescoed walls and giant room keys. Strolling past chapels hugged by trees with pears plopped on the grass. And warming up to an Oscar-winning breakfast—even as the wind threatens to blow my napkin over the olive groves and into the sunny Val di Chiana—just outside the Etruscan walls of Cortona. At Il Falconiere, mornings age well with pecorino, taleggio—a creamy, borderline-stinky cow's cheese, pinch bowls of ricotta with fig jam, goat's cheese, buffalo mozzarella in an ice bath and assorted pink, paper thin *salumi* (hams) that beggar belief. Not

a whiff of that complimentary breakfast of soggy Eggs Benedict and canned pineapple juice that the penny-pinching tourist has come to depend on. But then this is not that kind of place. It's a place where even if the pineapple juice was out of a can, it'd still be pretty fabulous.

Yet almost all the meats and cheeses here log few miles from farm to fork. But it's the local hero pecorino toscano that I pause for. Stacked at shopfronts like fat pennies—often cloaked in grape pomace or walnut leaf ash—the wheels of cheese look as business-like as the sausages in fishnet stockings and the glazed buttocks of air-cured ham swinging lustily from hooks. Michelangelo's friends sent him several as a reminder of home when he was in Rome, perhaps immersed in *The Creation of Adam*. Whether it melted his resolve to focus on his masterpiece alone, I don't know. But Pecorino tried.

At Cortona's Il Falconiere though, nothing and no one has to try hard to please. It's where owner Riccardo Baracchi, a falconer, winemaker and a cross between Richard Gere and Robert De Niro,

A butcher stand at Mercato Centrale, Florence (right); and bistecca alla fiorentina (below)

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at La Pievuccia, a family-run farm near Arezzo, more beatific?

A poster child for *agriturismo*, La Pievuccia is where two-year-old Ella, the spitting image of her father Riccardo Papini, scatters peals of laughter over the anti-pasti, while her venerable *nonna* sends out bowls of *aquacotta* or cooked water I could climb into and die. A kin of the stone soup, it's made with any vegetable you can lay your hands on and leftover bread. I run into it all over Tuscany, and find that there

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insists you (umm...) ruffle the feathers of his pet falcon. And his wife, Sylvia, an accomplished chef, who has so far netted a Michelin star for her efforts, introduces you to the hunkiest, juiciest medium-rare meat you've ever met. A formidable 1.1kg *bistecca alla fiorentina* or T-bone steak from prized Tuscan Chianina cows. This, before she invites you to a private party with Frances Mayes, her neighbour and author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, to savour unedited tales from the 'apricot-coloured' villa Bramasole—one that yearns for the sun.

I'm aware, I'm fawning. But in Tuscany, nothing short of superlatives is acceptable. As a rule, exclamations replace all full stops—like the rows of straight-backed cypresses on the rolling yellow-green knolls. Every word sounds like a long lost friend greeting another. And, eventually, something of these emphatic *tutto benes* and ciao ciao leaks into the air and onto your plate like an oozy egg ravioli.

Such summer-y, helplessly happy meals are what foment trouble, really. In a region anointed—even by begrudging Italians from other *regiones*—as the Sistine Chapel of rustic, hearty *cibo* (food), any attempt to canonise lunches and dinners can cause serious heartburn. Attempting to write a nine-page article on the best of the best, therefore, is like inviting ulcers for dinner.

Did the boxy Le Logge del Vignola in Montepulciano, for instance—a place known for its deep, dark Vino Nobile, 500-year-old underground cellars with equestrian stairs and, more recently, the bloody intrigues of *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*—work miracles? Was its breadcrumb-penciled *pici*—the only bona fide Tuscan pasta—or its Renaissance-inspired braised wild boar and chocolate filo 'cigar' worth all the effort to get there? Or was the glorious weathered wooden table

are as many recipes for it as there are yellow, tiled-roof houses here. Lighter than the *ribollita* (or the 'reboiled')—another *zuppa* of white cannellini beans and stale bread—*aquacotta*, like most peasant dishes, was first stirred in the pot of necessity. And it's a homage really to the poor women in the Middle Ages with little but water and olive oil to make a meal of, that, even today, few bother to veer from this simple, traditional fare. Even Ferran Adria across the Med in Catalonia couldn't (el)buli Toscana into molecular compliance.

It should be no surprise then that the humblest spots are also the best. Whether it's a crowded *cecina* or chickpea crepe joint in a grungy crook in the arm of Pisa or an *osteria*, the equivalent of a spruced-up dhaba, the simpler the food, the more memorable it is likely to be.

I can taste the day I wind down a lane off the river Arno in Pisa; a lane so narrow it's dark at noon. Past a bright red door that gives the bells a jiggle every time it's pried open by visitors clutching their Michelin bibles. The air inside is electric—very ghetto gourmet, very speakeasy. At the Maffei family's Osteria del Porton Rosso, there's no

Clockwise from top right: the riverfront in Pisa; Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence; lunch at a villa in Val di Chiana; and the nearby Church of Madonna

fine china. No twenty-page menus. Just closely spaced tables with excited chatter that dies down as soon as the steaming tagliolini with calamari comes swinging through the door. Midsentence, I start rolling my tagliolini with increasing impatience, forgetting all about the camera on the ready. But grinning like an idiot with sauce dribbling down my chin, this is one food memory that doesn't need digitising. I remember it well.

With owners who wait on you and top up your aper-

little Florentine brains" invented the tablecloth and introduced the Italian cucina to the magic of herbs. Pizza, originally from Naples, discovered oregano. And tomato, which had arrived by then from the New World, married basil. As for the soups and the breads, I suppose, they were from the more plebeian

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tif of *vin santo*, while you linger over the last crumbs of an excellent meal, Porton Rosso is as salt-of-the-earth as it gets. Which is why I am caught unawares by the abundance of seafood here. Once a staple in the region, especially in the coast-hugging Maremma, over the years, pollution and assorted reasons forced the fish to swim further and further away from the common tables. So much so that seafood is nearly as dear as the local white truffle and graces the high temples of food alone. Proximity to the Tyrrhenian Sea though keeps Pisa's and Porton Rosso's DNA of frugality intact.

Such frugality can be deceptive though. I call it the Dr Jekyllini and Mr Hydeini syndrome. And Florence is a key offender. With a personality split right down the middle, it plates up the best of both worlds. The city's now legendary obsession with meat—the T-bone steak, wild boar and *cinta senese* or heirloom 'belted' pigs 'imported' from neighbouring Siena—is obviously an indicator of its prosperous past. With the moneybags of Italy in town, including the Medici family, who invented banking as we know it, feasts and banquets were common. Songbirds like thrushes and larks were a delicacy. And if the sixteenth century writer Aretino is to be believed, it was about now that "those clever

Clockwise from top right: a wheel of taleggio; hearty ribollita; crostini con la bresaola; and tagliolini



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Clockwise from above: Il Falconiere; cantucci with vin santo; and a cellar in Montepulciano

With owners who top up your vin santo, while you linger over the last crumbs of an excellent meal, it's as salt-of-the-earth as it gets

quarters that fed such prosperity from the margins.

Yet the city's best known bits of food history are meaty, I fear. Ponte Vecchio, the only medieval stone bridge to survive the WWII bombings, was lined with butchers' shops, until the Medicis built the private Vasari Corridor over it to connect the Palazzo Vecchio (their offices) and Palazzo Pitti (their home). A huge exercise in vanity, the idea—to make an impression on guests coming in for a family wedding—was fouled by the rising stench from the shops. So, faster than you can say Lamborghini, butchers were traded in for goldsmiths. Frescoes of the Spanish-Imperial siege in 1529 also add colour to legends of attacking armies roasting pigs in the open to torment 30,000 walled-in Florentines, who died of starvation soon after.

I meet what seem like 30,000 hungry Florentines too (and tourists who'd give their right arm to be Florentines once every summer) at 'Ino. A truffle's toss from Ponte Vecchio, somewhere between the Duomo and the bridge, it's a curious little shop that is divided into a large, busy counter-space and clusters of high pub stools that involve a lot of clambering for five-foot-nothings like me. 'Ino, I assume, is the last syllabic bite of the panino or a small roll of flatbread. Packed like anchovies, here customers shout out orders for the only thing they peddle—paninis. If that sounds too simple, try decoding the menu. Hairier than trigonometry, it offers a million combinations of

meat and cheese stuffed into the belly of warm, crisp, crusty bread. Lost in translation, I decide to take the easy road—the high road. And choose what Ivano, my chaperone and tandem cycling partner, chooses for a quick afternoon nosh. I'm not quite sure, if it's cheese no. 22 and ham no. 30 I ate. But the inscrutable sandwich 2.0 is perfect.

Back on the crowded Piazza del Duomo, my mind wanders to Claudia and to the kitchen at Volterra's Del Duca, where I struggled to make my first tortellini. In her late teens, Claudia knew what the tennis-ball-sized truffles at her family's restaurant were worth, and if the Brunello was ripe for drinking. She also knew how far a pinch of saffron from San Gimignano could go and if the porcini mushrooms were in season. But when I ask her to play favourites and choose her 'last supper', Claudia is quick on the draw. Fresh pasta in her mum's basic tomato sauce. Da Vinci would have approved.



THE INFORMATION

GETTING AROUND

If you're flying to Florence from Delhi, Swiss Air (via Zurich) and KLM (via Amsterdam) are among the shortest hauls; tickets cost approx. ₹40,000 return. From Mumbai, Lufthansa (via Munich) and Austrian Airlines (via Vienna) also offer one-stop connections in a similar range. You can also fly to Pisa from Delhi and Mumbai.

VISAS

Applications for Schengen visas are accepted at the Embassy of Italy in Delhi and at the consulates in Mumbai and Kolkata. You can also apply at VFS, the visa outsourcing agency, centres. Single-entry and multiple-entry (up to 5 years) visas cost ₹3,840. For forms and lists of documents required, see vfs-italy.co.in.

WHERE TO STAY

Florence in summer is like Times Square on New Year's Eve. So book ahead if you want first dibs. At the high end, there are the 18th-century villas of the **Four Seasons Hotel** (from €295; fourseasons.com) or the boutique options from the **Lungarno Hotels Collection** (from €170; lungarnocollection.com). **Grand Hotel Adriatico** (from €85; hoteladriatico.it) and **Hotel Davanzati** (from €122; hoteldavanzati.it)—within walking distance from the Duomo—are more affordable.

But a Tuscan holiday is incomplete without the family-run inns in the countryside or villas in the medieval towns perched on the humps of knolls. Consider the **Fattoria di Petrognano** (from €80; fattoriadipetrognano.it), not 20 minutes from Lucca with an olive press and a winery or **La Pievuccia** (from €85; lapievuccia.it), near Arezzo. If you're willing to loosen the purse strings, you could bed at **Castello di Velona** (€345; castellodivelona.siena.com) near Siena or **Il Falconiere** (from €290; ilfalconiere.it), outside Cortona. My personal favourite is **Il Chiostro** (from €150; relaisilchiostro dipienza.com), adjacent to a church at Pienza, a small, atmospheric town.

CULINARY TUSCANY

>**Check out the neighbourhood café.** The best way to introduce yourself to any town or city in Tuscany is to find your way to the busiest piazzas. And where there's a piazza, there will be a host of cafés—all with very similar menus. In Florence, especially around the Duomo, the food is rarely disappointing. And that holds true for most cities and towns. In Siena, though, the cafés at the main square or the Piazza del Campo serve lousy food at ridiculous prices.

The first coffees in the morning are cappuccinos, but Italians famously shun anything other than espressos through the rest of the day. A plate of biscottis and dainty pastries often appears 'magically' with the coffee. But if you want something more substantial, order a panini or a ham, cheese and pickled vegetable platter.

>**Have a couple of Michelin-starred meals.** It leaves no room for surprises, but I see the point of following the herd in this case. Because, no matter how much time you have at hand, you can't quite 'eat it all' in Tuscany. The trick is to choose wisely from among the starred restaurants and book ahead (many months in advance). In Florence, the recently feted Il Palagio at the Four Seasons Hotel serves Italian cibo with a contemporary twist in a setting that's just as appetising—with vaulted ceilings in formal dining areas and outdoor terraces overlooking the garden. At Pisa, the **Osteria del Porton Rosso** (osteriadelportonrosso.com) is a less formal and heartier affair, while in Lucca, the **Buca di San Antonio** (bucadisantonio.it), bang opposite Puccini's house, serves a mean roasted guinea fowl with muscatel grapes. The family-run **Enoteca Del Duca** (enotecadelduca-ristorante.it) in Volterra, where they also conduct cooking classes, and Montepulciano's **Le Logge del Vignola** (leloggedelvignola.com) are great places to reserve an afternoon or evening for. A meal at one of these places will set you back by at least €50.



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An al fresco café overlooking the Duomo at Florence

>Visit wineries and cantinas.

Practically every other wine in Toscana is made of the Sangiovese or red Italian wine grape. And there are at least two great Sangiovese wines you must uncork here. VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO is one, and the Cantina del Redi, a 500-year-old underground cellar, is the best place to get a taste in town. For a bottle of the deeper, darker and full-bodied Brunello produced in the neighbouring region of Montalcino, head to **Castello di Romitorio** (castelloromitorio.com). A beautiful winery overlooking the Val d'Orcia, it's set apart from the more traditional wineries by the quirky sculptures planted around the estate and the colourful labels designed by owner and artist Sandro Chia. To experience the wines made of Vernaccia, a local white grape, visit the Meseo del Vino next to the Parco della Rocca (fortress) in San Gimignano. Add a *prosecco*, the local sparkling wine, a *vin santo*, a dessert wine, and a *limoncello*, a lemon liqueur, to your stash and you'll have (almost) corked Tuscany.

>**Go shopping.** A gourmet shopping list in Tuscany can be as long as the river Arno. But the good news is that there's at least one—and that's an understatement—makeshift food market or store in every neighbourhood. In smaller

towns like Cortona and Pienza, you'll have to only walk towards the main square to run into friendly grocers who stock fresh, seasonal produce that the neighbouring cafés and restaurants depend on. Several artisanal cheese and ham shops that also sell condiments, oils and vinegars are tucked away in the lanes that radiate from the piazzas. The main shopping areas in Siena and Florence also have a number of shops selling baked delicacies like biscotti and *cavallucci*, *panpepato* and *panforte*, as well as dry pastas, including the local picci. For those with deep pockets, add a tiny container of saffron from San Gimignano and white truffles to your list. The latter is rarely bought over the counter, but a good restaurant might be willing to part with its riches for a good price. Steer clear of the synthetic truffle oils though.

>**Take a food tour.** For foodies who want a larger slice of the culinary pie, there are several operators who offer food tours; tours that include visits to farmers' markets, cookery classes and wining and dining at some of the best restaurants. Try **Tuscan Away** (tuscanway.com), **Ecco la Cucina** (eccolacucina.com) and **Gourmet on Tour** (gourmetontour.com). Tours cost about €2,000 per person for a week.

■ SOITY BANERJEE